Russian Short Stories

The Disciple

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The Disciple by Aleksandr I. Kuprin

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I

The great white double-decked steamer, built after an American pattern, was gayly floating down the Volga. It was the time of sultry, languid July days. The passengers passed half the day on the little outside western balcony, and the other half on the eastern—it all depended on which side the shade was. They got on and clambered off at the intermediate stops, and finally there was formed a permanent complement of travelers, whose faces had long since become mutually familiar and who had grown rather tedious to one another.

During the day they occupied themselves with indolent flirting, with buying strawberries, sun-cured, stringy fish, milk, cracknels, and sturgeons that smelt of kerosene. They ate without cease all day long, as is always the case on steamers, where the jolting of the vessel, the fresh air, the proximity of the water, and the ennui all develop an inordinate appetite.

In the evening, when it grew cooler, the scent of new-mown hay and of honey-yielding flowers would be borne to the deck from the river banks, and, when a dense summer mist would

arise from the river, everybody gathered in the saloon.

A thin little miss from Moscow, who had studied at a conservatory—the bones of her breast stood out sharply from her low-cut little blouse, while her eyes had an unnatural sparkle and her cheeks flamed with hectic spots—sang the ballads of Dargomizhsky, in a voice tiny, but of an unusually pleasant timbre. Then, for a brief while, followed disputes about internal politics.

A thirty-year-old landowner of Simbir served as the general laughingstock and source of diversion—he was as rosy and smooth-skinned as a Yorkshire suckling pig; his flaxen hair was clipped so short that it stood up like the quills of a hedgehog; his mouth gaped; the distance from his nose to his upper lip was enormous; his eyelashes were white, and his mustaches were shockingly so. He exuded an atmosphere of the ingenuous silliness, freshness, naivete and assiduity of the man who is close to the rich, black-loam land. He was just married, had put up his bonds, and had been appointed a justice of the peace. All these particulars, as well as the maiden name of his mother, and the names of all the people who had exerted their influence on his behalf, were known long since to everybody on the steamer, including in that number the captain and his two mates, and, it would seem, even the deckhands. As a representative of the ruling power, and a member of a noble family of all the Russias, he overdid his patriotism and was constantly babbling nonsense. From Lower Novgorod to Saratov he had already contrived to shoot and hang, over and over again, all the sheenies, Finns, Pollacks, damned

Armenians, Little Russians and other outlanders.

During the stops he would come out on deck in his cap with its velvet band and two insignia, and, shoving his hands in his trouser-pockets, exposing his nobly-born, gray cloth-clad posterior, he would watch, as one having authority, the sailors, the porters, the drivers of three-horse stages in their round hats trimmed with peacock feathers. His wife, a slender, elegant *demi vierge* from St. Petersburg, with an exceedingly pale face and exceedingly vivid, malevolent lips, did not oppose her husband in anything and was taciturn; at times she would smile—with a subtle, malignant smile—at the follies of her husband; for the greater part of the day she sat in the blaze of the sun with a yellow-backed French novel in her hands, her little thoroughbred feet in red morocco slippers crossed and stretched out along the bench. Somehow, one involuntarily sensed in her a *carrièriste*, a future governor's or some other high official's lady; most probably, this would be the future Messalina of the entire district. There was always an odor of *Crême Simon* about her, and of some modish perfume—sweet, pungent, and tart, that made one want to sneeze. Their name was Kostretzov.

Among the permanent passengers there was also a colonel of the artillery—the most good-natured of men, a sloven and a glutton, with a grizzled stubble bristling on his cheeks and chin, and with his khaki-colored summer uniform jacket glistening over his abdomen from all possible sorts of soups and sauces. Every day, in the morning, he descended into the chef's domain, and would there choose a *stierlyadka* or a

sieuruzhka, which would be brought up to him on deck, still quivering in its wooden vessel, and, with his own hand, like an officiating high priest, breathing hard and smacking his lips, he would make marks with a knife upon the head of the fish, in circumvention of the cook's slyness—lest he be served with another fish, a dead one.

Every evening, after the singing of the young lady from Moscow and after the political disputes, the colonel would play at a variation of whist far into the night. His constant partners were: an inspector of excise who was traveling to Askhabad—a man of absolutely indeterminate years, all wrinkled, with atrocious teeth, who was insane on the subject of amateur theatricals (in the intervals of the game, during deals, he would tell anecdotes of Hebrew life, with spirit and gayety, and not at all badly); the editor of some newspaper published near the Volga—a bearded, beetle-browed man in golden spectacles; and a student by the name Drzhevetzky.

The student played with constant good luck. He grasped the plays with rapidity, had a splendid memory for all the scores and hands, and regarded the mistakes of his partners with unvarying benignity. Despite the great heat, he was always clad in a greenish frock-coat with very long skirts and an exaggeratedly high collar, and with every button buttoned. His shoulder-blades were so greatly developed that he seemed round-shouldered, even with his great height. His hair was light and curly; his eyes were blue; his face was long and clean-shaven. He bore a slight resemblance, to judge by antique portraits, to the twenty-five-year-old generals of the War of

1812, in defense of the fatherland. However, there was something peculiar about his appearance. At times, when he was off his guard, his eyes would assume such a tired, tortured expression, that one could freely, from his appearance, give his age even as fifty years. But the unobservant people on the steamer did not remark this, of course, just as his partners in play did not remark an unusual peculiarity of his hands: the student's thumbs were so long that they were almost even with the tips of his index fingers, while all his finger nails were short, broad, flat and strong. These hands testified with unusual conclusiveness to an obdurate will, to a cold egoism that was a stranger to all vacillations, and to his being capable of crime.

Somehow, from Nizhnii Novgorod to Sizran, during two evenings running, there were little games of chance. The games were "twenty-one," chemin de fer, and Polish banco. The student came out the winner to the tune of something like seventy roubles. But he had managed to do it so charmingly, and then had so obligingly proffered a loan of money to the petty lumber dealer he had won from, that everybody received an impression of his being a man of wealth, a man of good society and bringing-up.

II

In Samara it took a very long time for the steamer to unload and load again. The student went for a swim, and, upon his return, took a seat in the captain's roundhouse—a freedom permitted only to very likable passengers after having sailed together for a long time. With especial attention, he watched

intently as three Jews boarded the steamer, apart from each other—all three of them very well dressed, with rings on their hands and with sparkling pins in their cravats. He also managed to notice that the Jews pretended not to know one another, and also remarked a certain common trait in their appearance, which trait seemed to have been stamped upon them by the same profession, as well as certain almost imperceptible signals which they communicated to one another at a distance.

“Do you know who these men are?” he asked the captain’s mate.

The captain’s mate, a rather dark boy without a mustache, who, in the saloon, played the part of an old sea-wolf, was very kindly disposed toward the student. During his watches he would tell Drzhevetzky unseemly stories out of his past life and uttered abominable things about all the women who were then on the ship—and the student would hear him out patiently and attentively, even though with a certain coolness.

“These?” the captain’s mate repeated the student’s question. “Commission merchants, beyond a doubt. Probably trading in flour or grain. Well, we shall find out right away. Listen, mister—what’s your name—listen!” he called out, leaning over the railings. “Are you with a freight? With grain?”

“All through!” answered the Jew, lifting up his clever, observant face. “Now I am travelling for my own pleasure.”

In the evening the young lady from Moscow again sang—“Who Wedded Us”; the justice of the peace shouted about the good to

be derived from exterminating all the sheenies and inaugurating corporal punishment throughout all the Russias; the colonel was ordering *Sevriuzhka à l'Américaine*, with capers. The two commission merchants sat down to a game of "sixty-six"—with old cards; then, as though by chance, the third one sat down with them, and the game changed to "preference." At the final settlement one of the players was short of change—he could find only banknotes of large denominations.

He said:

"Well, gentlemen, how are we going to settle? Do you want to play at rouge et noir?"

"Oh, no, thanks—I don't play at any games of chance," answered one of the others. "But then, it's a mere trifle. You can keep the change."

The first man appeared to take offense, but at this juncture the third one intervened:

"Gentlemen—we aren't any steamboat sharpers, I think, and are in good company. Pardon me—how much did you win?"

"My, but you are a hot-tempered fellow," said the first. "Six roubles and twenty kopecks."

"Very well, then … I'll play you for the whole thing."

"Oi, don't scare me!" said the first, and began to deal.

He lost, and in his vexation doubled his stakes. And so, within a few minutes, a lively game of the hazardous Polish banco was on—in which game the banker deals three cards to each partner, and turns up one card for each partner for himself.

Not even half an hour had passed before the table was covered with heaps of banknotes, little stacks of gold and piles of silver. The banker was losing all the time, and, with all this, his portrayal of amazement and indignation was done with exceeding verisimilitude.

“Do you always have such a run of luck on steamers?” he would ask a partner with a venomous smile.

“Yes—and on Thursdays especially,” the other would answer with sang froid.

The unlucky player demanded that the cards be cut anew. But once more he began to lose. First and second class passengers had crowded around their table. The play had, little by little, inflamed them all. The first to come in with them was the good-natured colonel of artillery; he was followed by the clerk of the excise, who was going to Akhsbad, and by the bearded editor. Madame Kostretzova’s eyes became enkindled—a proof of her high-strung nervous temperament.

“Do put your stakes against him,” she said in an angry whisper to her husband. “Can’t you see that bad luck is pursuing him?”

“*Mais, ma chérie.*… Only God knows who these people are,” the justice of the peace protested feebly.

“Idiot!” said she, in a vehement whisper. “Bring my pocketbook from the cabin.”

III

The student had long since fathomed just what the matter was. It was perfectly clear to him that these three men formed the usual party of steamer card sharpers. But, evidently, it was

necessary for him to ponder over certain things and to comprehend them. He took a long black cigar at the counter, and settled down on the balcony, watching the steamer's shadow gliding over the yellow water, refracting the fantastic little spots of sunlight. The captain's mate upon seeing him ran down from the bridge, laughing significantly.

"Do you want me to show you one of the most interesting people in Russia, professor?"

"Really?" said the student indifferently, flicking the ashes off his cigar with a fingernail.

"Look at that gentleman over there—the one with the gray mustaches and a green silk shade over his eyes. That's Balunsky—the King of the Cardsharpers."

The student grew animated and threw a quick glance to his right.

"That fellow? Really? Is that truly Balunsky himself?"

"Yes. The very same."

"Well, is he playing now?"

"No. He's done for, entirely. And even if he were to sit down to play—why then, as you know yourself, it would be our bounden duty to warn the public.… All he does is to hang about the tables, just watching and nothing more."

At this moment Balunsky was passing by them, and the student's eyes followed him with the liveliest interest. Balunsky was a tall, splendidly formed old man, with fine, proud features. The student saw much in his appearance: a habit from

of old of bearing himself unconstrainedly with self-assurance before the eyes of a great gathering; soft, well-cared for hands; an assumed, extrinsic air of seigneur. But the student also noticed a slight defect in the use of his right leg, and the time-whitened seams of his one time splendid Parisian overcoat. And the student, with an unfailing attentiveness and some peculiar feeling compounded of indifferent pity and a contempt devoid of any malice, observed all these trifles.

“There was a chap for you—but he’s all done for now,” said the captain’s mate.

“There’s rather a big game going on downstairs,” said the student calmly.

Then, suddenly, turning toward the captain’s mate and staring stonily into his very pupils, he said as simply as if he were ordering his breakfast or dinner:

“To tell you the truth, *mon cher ami*, I have been keeping my eye on you for two whole days now, and I see that you aren’t at all a stupid fellow, and, of course, are above any prejudices, such as are common to old women. For we are supermen, you and I—isn’t that so?”

“Well, generally speaking.… And according to the general theory of Nietzsche…” the captain’s mate mumbled sententiously. “The life of man…”

“Yes, yes… Particulars by mail.”

The student unbuttoned his frock-coat, and took a dandified wallet of red leather with a gold monogram out of his side-pocket, and extracted two bills of a hundred roubles each out

of the wallet.

“Catch hold, admiral! They are yours,” said he, impressively.

“What for?” asked the captain’s mate, blinking his eyes in surprise.

“For your so-resplendent beauty,” said the student gravely. “And for the pleasure of conversing with a clever man who is unhampered by any prejudices.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

This time the student spoke curtly and significantly, just like a general before an encounter:

“First of all, not to warn anybody about Balunsky. I need him as a control and a sort of a left hand. Is that a go?”

“It’s a go!” answered the captain’s mate gayly.

“Secondly: show me which one of the waiters can bring my own pack of cards to the table.”

The sailor became somewhat hesitant.

“Procophii, perhaps?” he said, as though deliberating with himself.

“Ah, that’s the thin, yellow chap, with drooping mustaches? Isn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s the fellow.”

“Very well, then … He has a suitable face. I’ll have a little private talk with him by myself, and a separate reckoning. After that, my youthful but ardent friend, I offer you the following proposition: I offer you two-and-a-half percent of the

gross receipts."

"Of the gross receipts?" the captain's mate began to snicker in delight.

"Yes, sir! That ought to make, approximately, let me see… The colonel, I think, has a thousand roubles or so of his own, and, perhaps, some official money—two thousand, let us say, in round figures. I estimate the justice of the peace at a thousand also. If we succeed in making his wife loosen up, I consider all this money as good as in my pocket already. All the others don't amount to much. And then I reckon all those snot-noses have about six or seven thousand among them.…"

"Whom do you mean?"

"Why, these petty steamboat sharpers. These same young men that, as you say, trade in grain and flour."

"But really… but really…" The captain's mate suddenly saw the light.

"Oh, yes, really! I'll show them how the game ought to be played. They ought to be working a three card monte game around some corner at fairs. Captain, you have three hundred more guaranteed you, beside these two hundred. But there must be an agreement: you must not pull any awful faces at me, even if I lose my shirt; you must not interfere where you are not asked; nor back me up to win; and—most important of all—no matter what happens to me, even the very worst, you must not reveal your acquaintance with me. Remember, you are neither a master nor a pupil, but just a capper."

"A capper!" snickered the captain's mate.

“What a fool!” said the student calmly.

And, throwing the stub of his cigar over board, he got up quickly to intercept Balunsky, who was passing by, and familiarly put his arm through that of the other. They conversed for not more than two minutes, and, when they had finished, Balunsky doffed his hat with an air of obsequity and mistrust.

IV

Late at night the student and Balunsky were sitting upon the ship’s bridge. The moonlight played and spattered on the water. The left shore, high, steep, all grown over with shaggy woods, taciturnly hung over the very steamer, that was now passing altogether near it. The shore to the right lay like a distant, flat splotch. Frankly slumping, hunched up even more than usual, the student was negligently sitting on a bench, his long legs stretched out before him. His face betrayed fatigue, and his eyes were dull.

“About how old are you?” asked Balunsky, gazing at the river.

The student let the question pass in silence.

“You must pardon my impertinence,” Balunsky persisted, after a little fidgeting. “I understand very well your reason for placing me near you. I also understand why you told that four-flusher that you would slap his face if, after inspection, the pack of cards would prove to be right. You uttered this superbly. I admired you. But, for God’s sake, do tell me how you did it?”

The student finally forced himself to speak, as though with

revulsion:

“You see, the trick lies in that I do not resort to any contra-legal expedients. I base my play upon the human soul. Have no fear—I know all the old devices you used to practice. Stacking, holding out, devices for concealment, cold decks—am I right?”

“No,” remarked Balunsky, offended. “We had stunts even more complicated. I, for instance, was the first to bring satin cards into use.”

“Satin cards?” the student repeated.

“Why, yes. Satin is pasted over the card. By rubbing against cloth the pile of the satin is bent to one side, and a jack is drawn thereon. Then, when the colors have dried, the pile is reversed, and a queen drawn. If your queen is beaten, all you have to do is to draw the card over the table.”

“Yes, I’ve heard of that,” said the student. “It did give one an extra chance. But then, stuss is such a fool game!”

“I do agree with you that it has gone out of fashion. But that was a time of the splendid efflorescence of the art. How much wit, how much resourcefulness we had to exert. … Poluboyarinov used to clip the skin at the tips of his fingers; his tactile sense was more exquisite than that of a blind man. He would recognize a card by the mere touch. And what about cold decks? Why, this took whole years to master.”

The student yawned.

“That was all a primitive game.”

“Yes, yes! That is just why I am questioning you. Wherein does

your secret lie? I must tell you that I was in on large killings. During a single month I made more than six hundred thousand in Odessa and St. Petersburg. And, besides that, I won a four-story house and a bustling hotel."

The student waited for him, on the chance of his adding something; then, a little later, he asked:

"Aha! You set up a mistress, a fine turnout, a lad in white gloves to wait at table—yes?"

"Yes!" answered Balunsky, sadly and humbly.

"There, now, you see—I guessed all that beforehand. There really was something romantic about your generation. And that is readily understood. Horse-fairs, hussars, gypsy-women, champagne. … Were you ever beaten up?"

"Yes—after the Liebiyadinskaya fair I was laid up in Tambov for a whole month. You can just imagine; I even grew bald—all my hair fell out. Nothing like that had ever happened to me up to that time—not as long as I had Duke Kudukov about me. He worked with me on a ten percent basis. I must say that I had never in my life met a man of greater physical strength. His title and his strength screened us both. Besides that, he was a man of unusual courage. He'd be sitting and getting stewed on Teneriffe at the bar, and when he'd hear a hubbub in the card room he would rush to my rescue. Oh, what a racket he and I raised once in Penza! Candlesticks, mirrors, lustres …"

"Did drink do for him?" asked the student, as though in passing.

"How did you know that?" asked Balunsky, in amazement.

“Why, just so.… The actions of men are uniform in the extreme. Really, living becomes a bore at times.”

After a long silence, Balunsky asked:

“But why do you gamble yourself?”

“Really, that is something I do not know myself,” said the student with a melancholy sigh. “For instance, I have vowed to myself, on my word of honor, to abstain from gambling for exactly three years. And for two years I did abstain; but today, for some reason or other, I got my dander up. And, I assure you, gambling is repulsive to me. Nor am I in need of money.”

“Have you any saved?”

“Yes—a few thousand. Formerly, I thought that it might be of use to me at some time or other. But time has sped somehow incongruously fast. I often ask myself—what is it that I desire? I am surfeited with women. Pure love, marriage, a family, are not for me—or, to put it more correctly, I do not believe in them. I eat with exceeding moderation, and I do not drink a drop. Am I to save up for an old age? But what am I to do in my old age? Others have a consolation—religion. I often think: well, now, suppose I were made a king or an emperor this very day.… What would I desire? Upon my word of honor, I don’t know. There’s nothing for me to desire, even.”

The water gurgled monotonously as the steamer clove through it.… Radiantly, sadly and evenly the moon poured down its light upon the white sides of the steamer, upon the river, upon the distant shores. The steamer was going through a narrow, shallow splace… “Six… Si-ix an’ a ha-alf!… Go slow!” a man

with a plummet was bawling nasally at the prow.

“But what is your system of playing?” asked Balunsky timidly.

“Why, I have no particular system,” answered the student lazily. “I do not play at cards, but upon human stupidity. I am not at all a sharper. I never prick or mark a pack. I only acquaint myself with the design on the back of the cards, and for that reason always play with secondhand cards. But it’s all the same to me—after two or three deals I am bound to know every card, because my visual memory is phenomenal. Yet I do not want to expend the energy of my brain vainly. I am firmly convinced that if a man will set his heart on being fooled, fooled he will be, beyond a doubt. And therefore I knew beforehand the fate of today’s game.”

“In what way?”

“Very simply. For instance: the justice of the peace is a vain glorious and a silly fool—if you will pardon the pleonasm. His wife does whatever she wants to with him. But she is a woman of passion; impatient, and, apparently, hysterical. I had to draw the two of them into the game. He committed many blunders; but she committed twice as many, just to spite him. In this way they let pass that one moment when they were having a run of pure luck. They failed to take advantage of it. They started winning back only when luck had turned its back upon them; whereas ten minutes before that they could have left me without my breeches.”

“Is it really possible to calculate all this?” asked Balunsky quietly.

“Of course. Now for another instance. Take the colonel. This man has far-flung, inexhaustible luck, which he himself does not suspect. And that is because he is an expansive, careless, magnanimous fellow. By God, I was a bit ashamed of plucking him. But it was already impossible to stop. The fact was, that those three little sheenies were irritating me.”

“‘Could not endure—the heart burst into flame’?” asked the old sharper, quoting the stanza from Lermontov.

The student gnashed his teeth, and his face became somewhat animated.

“You’re perfectly right,” said he, contemptuously. “That’s just it—I couldn’t endure it. Judge for yourself: they got on the steamer to shear the rams, yet they have no daring, nor skill, nor sang froid. When one of them was passing the deck to me, I at once noticed that his hands were clammy and trembling. ‘Eh, my dear fellow, your heart is in your mouth!’ As for their game, it was perfectly clear to me. The partner to the left—the one on whose cheek was a little mole, all grown over with hair—was stacking the cards. That was as plain as day. It was necessary to make them sit apart, and for that very reason—” here the student resorted to patter, “I had recourse, *cher maître*, to your enlightened cooperation. And I must say that you carried out my idea with full correctness. Allow me to present you with your share.”

“Oh, but why so much?”

“A mere nothing. You shall do still another good turn for me.”

“I am listening.”

“Do you remember perfectly the face of the justice’s wife?”

“Yes.”

“Then you will go to her and say: ‘Your money was won purely through chance.’ You may even tell her that I am a sharper. Yes—but that it is in such a lofty, Byronian manner, you know. She will bite. She will get her money in Saratov, at the Hotel Moscow, tonight, at six, from Drzhevetzky, the student. Room number one.”

“So I am to be a go-between—is that it?” asked Balunsky.

“Why put it so unpleasantly? Isn’t ‘One good turn deserves another’ better?”

Balunsky got up, stood shifting on the same spot from one foot to the other, and took off his hat. Finally he said, hesitatingly:

“I’ll do it. After all, it’s a trifle. But, perhaps you will need me as an operative?”

“No,” answered the student. “To act collectively is the old style. I work alone.”

“Alone? Always alone?”

“Of course. Whom could I trust?” retorted the student with a calm bitterness. “If I am sure of your comradely rectitude—an honor among thieves, you understand—I am not at all sure of the steadiness of your nerves. Another may be brave, and without covetousness, and be a faithful friend, but … only until the first silken petticoat happens to make a swine, a dog, and a traitor of him. And what of blackmailings? What of extortions? What of importunities in old age, in incapacitation? … Eh,

what's the use!"

"I am amazed at you," said Balunsky quietly. "You are the new generation. You have neither timidity, nor pity, nor imagination … You have a certain contempt for everything. Is it possible that all your secret consists of just that and nothing more?"

"Just that. But in a great concentration of the will as well. You may believe me or not—it is all one to me—but ten times today, by an effort of my will, have I compelled the colonel to stake small sums, when it was to his interests to have staked large ones. It doesn't come easy to me. … I have a monstrous headache right now. And besides … besides, I don't know, I can't imagine, what it means to get a beating or to go to pieces from confusion. Organically, I am devoid of shame or fear, and that isn't at all as joyous a thing as it may seem at first glance. True, I constantly carry a revolver about me—but then, you must believe me when I tell you that at a critical moment I shall not forget about it. However …" the student simulated a yawn and extended his hand to Balunsky with a weary gesture. "However, au revoir, general. I can see your eyes closing. …"

"My best wishes," said the old sharper respectfully, bowing his gray head.

Balunsky went off to bed. The student, hunched up, with weary, sad eyes for a long while regarded the waves that reflected the light like fish-scales. Late at night Kostretzova came out on deck. But he did not as much as turn in her direction.